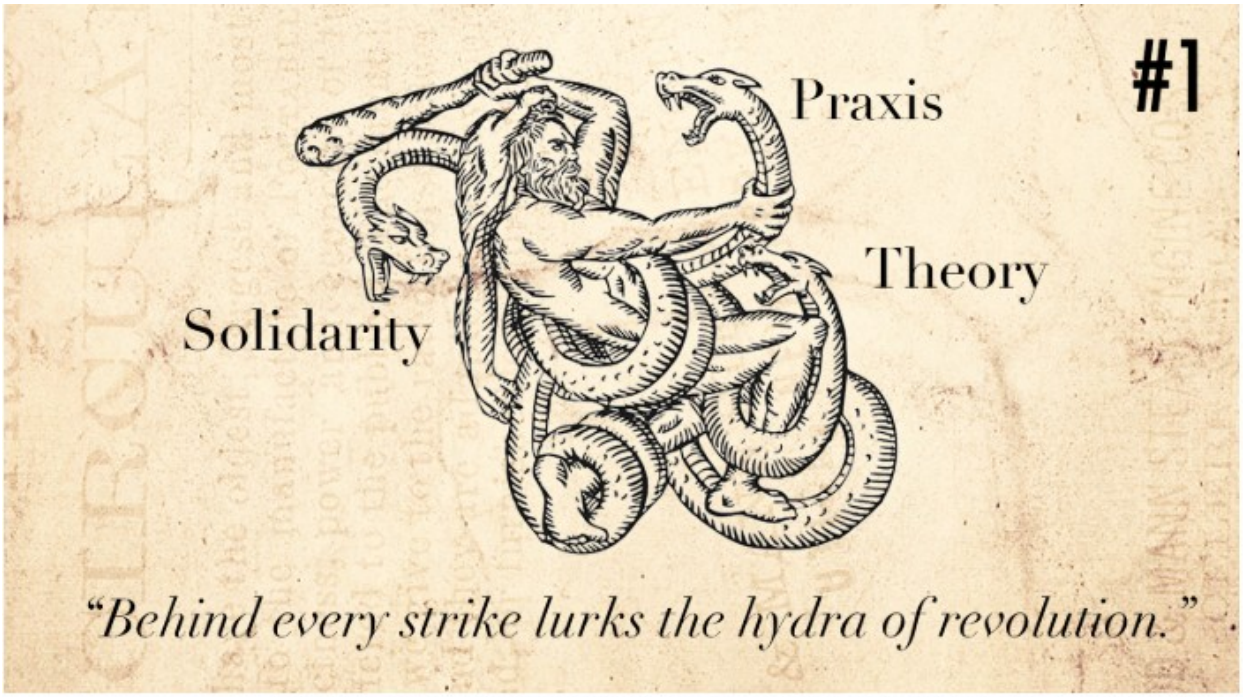

Line drawing of Heracles slaying the Hydra. Quotation reads: "Behind every strike lurks the hydra of revolution." The hydra heads are captioned "Theory" "Praxis" and "Solidarity."

Socialists and Strike Support: Perspectives and Politics

by Joe Allen, Midwest Socialist

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This is the first installment in a series from the Chicago DSA Labor Branch entitled "Strike Support Perspectives." Each piece represents a different view of how DSA should engage with ongoing strikes. In this piece, author Joe Allen argues that socialists must pair strike support with political education.

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The current wave of strikes in the United States is a welcome change in the class struggle in the United States. Strike votes have been taken across a myriad of industries and unions from transit workers to airline mechanics. The uptick in strike activity provides those of us in the DSA and the broader left with an opportunity to do strike support, in many cases, for

the first time in their political lives. Thankfully, while the last half century has been a barren time for labor organizing, there are numerous examples in recent history of strike solidarity done well. We must build on this precedent to take full advantage of the revolutionary potential of the class struggle inherent in strikes.

“Our Power”

Earlier this year veteran trade unionists Rand Wilson and Peter Olney put forward a perspective in *Jacobin* for upcoming contract negotiations and the political opportunities it represents for socialists and the labor movement. They wrote:

This year, 450 collective bargaining agreements covering more than 200 union members apiece will expire, according to Bloomberg, which maintains the most comprehensive database of expiring agreements outside of the AFL-CIO. Of these, 160 agreements cover more than 1,000 workers. These 450 contracts, involving more than a million and a half workers, are an ideal opportunity for the labor movement to showcase our power and the advantages of collective bargaining.

Strikes alone don’t convince workers to unionize. Clear victories by workers over the bosses propel organizing efforts forward. Even with the increased militancy, many of the contract settlements this year have been quite mediocre and are unlikely to entice nonunion workers. At Southwest Airlines, unionized mechanics won a significant 20% increase in wages without striking but also gave the company greater ability to outsource union jobs. In other cases, many settlements have left unresolved the issues that drove workers on to the picket lines. One of Heaven Hill distillery workers told a local news crew, “We are going back for exactly what we went on strike for.”

Assessing the contract settlements coming out of this year’s wave of strikes can tell us about the direction of working class struggle. Though striking workers certainly won important gains in their contract during the most high profile industrial strike this year at John Deere, (despite repeated efforts by the UAW leadership to get them to accept two bad deals), a large number of strikers still voted no on the third and final contract offer including a clear no vote at the Waterloo, Iowa UAW local union. In the aftermath of the strike, John Deere updated its earnings and forecast for next year literally crowed that it could have afforded to give more to the UAW strikers.
Bloomberg reported:

The six-year agreement that the union voted to accept last week includes a 10% initial raise and is expected to result in incremental pre-tax costs of about $250 million to $300 million annually. That's minor compared with the as much as $7 billion in net income Deere expects to generate next year alone.

There's the strike and then there's the contract battle after returning to work. For groups of workers, like at Nabisco who won some gains on working conditions, big questions remain about contract enforcement and the union's responsiveness. And even more seriously, in the case of the Bronx Terminal strike at Hunts Point in New York City, an unknown number of strikers have been fired since returning to work after the strike was settled.

What could have been the largest nationwide strike of the year by IATSE against the major Hollywood studios and streaming services was quashed by the union's undemocratic voting procedures. Though a slim majority of members voted against the agreement (amid the background of the death and injuries on the film set of *Rust*), IATSE declared the contract passed by the undemocratic delegate system.

One of the most important aspects of the mini-strike wave this year is that it is largely driven by rank and file workers, not the union leaderships, who lag far behind their members. We are witnessing a labor movement struggling to get off its knees. Many of the striking unions have not been on strike for a generation or more: Nabisco's last strike was in 1969; John Deere, 1986. A few DSA members have some experience as strikers and supporters here in Chicago from the teachers, hotel, and healthcare strikes during the past few years. But for the most part, the current strike wave is many DSA members' first experience with the class struggle.

For the foreseeable future strikes are likely to continue given the historic low unemployment and rising inflation. Looking into next year, the Cal State faculty and staff contract ends in June, and the West Coast Longshore union's contract with the Pacific Maritime Association ends in July. Comrades should also keep an eye out for local contracts that expire throughout 2022 and strikes we can play an important role in supporting. Further off, a subject that has seen contentious debate during the recent Teamster election, is the National Master UPS-Teamster contract that expires in 2023.

All of this makes a discussion of DSA's approach to strike support important and relevant. There has been quite a lot written lately about strike support by our DSA members in Portland and by *Teen Vogue*. Comrades should read them and write about their own experiences. I want to delve deeper into the

politics of strike support to highlight from a Marxist perspective, the centrality of the working class in the struggle for socialism, and the importance of socialist organization. Strike support is central to our work: it is neither apolitical charity nor an opportunity to grandstand.

Schools for socialism

A few years ago in my introduction to a reading list I compiled on the rank and file strategy, I wrote:

Marxists are guided by one principle in all our work: "The emancipation of the working class must be the work of the working class itself." It is this very democratic and liberatory concept—"self-emancipation"—that distinguishes Marxism from other rival 'socialisms' in Marx's time, and has proven a resilient attraction to tens of millions since his death in 1883.

The concept of self-emancipation informs our view of trade unions. Marx and Engels were the first socialists to support unions, for example. Engels wrote:

They [unions] are the military school of the workingmen in which they prepare themselves for the great struggle which cannot be avoided. And as schools of war, the Unions are unexcelled.

Throughout the late 19th and early 20th Century, strikes, because of the enormous state repression and organized vigilante violence paid for by the capitalists such as the notorious Pinkertons, could lead to mass strikes that took on a revolutionary character. One German labor minister in the 19th Century declared: "Behind every strike lurks the hydra [monster] of revolution."

Now, it has been a long time since strikes took on these larger political characteristics. The rank and file rebellion of the 1960s and 1970s documented best by Stan Weir, provided a road map for radicals who made a turn to the working class after 1970. The rebellion may have demonstrated militant action by U.S. workers, but fell well-short of the revolutionary potential demonstrated during the same era in France in 1968, Italy in 1969, or the Portuguese working class after the fall of fascism in 1974.

In the very early days of the Russian Marxist movement making its initial connection to striking Russian workers, Lenin had much more modest goals in mind but with important lessons to be learned, when he wrote in 1899:

Strikes, therefore, teach the workers to unite; they show them that they can struggle against the capitalists only when they are united; strikes teach the workers to think of the struggle of the whole working class against the whole class of factory owners and against the arbitrary, police government.

Socialist support strikes not only because we want a particular group of workers to beat their individual boss, but we hope the very struggle will deepen the class struggle and radicalize larger groups of workers. Solidarity is the way to win and should teach workers the need to overcome gender, racial, or ethnic divisions. All of this is necessary for us to build a working-class socialist movement in this country. We should not be shy about our politics, why we are supporting striking workers, and what we hope to achieve.

Socialists should always seek to work as cooperatively as possible with the official union leadership bodies. We should also approach local elected officials about the best way to support the strike — after all we want them to win. Socialists should have a united front, an ecumenical spirit in our solidarity work with other groups of radicals, activists, and unions. There's nothing more bewildering to striking workers than what appears to be "turf" battles between their supporters. If there are political differences in solidarity committees, they need to be argued out openly and resolved democratically.

However, open displays of bigotry by strikers, union officials or community supporters has to be confronted in the best possible way. They shouldn't be given a pass that will only impede our ability to build support. I learned recently from a Minneapolis comrade that during the strike-then-lockout of Marathon refinery workers this past spring, a fascist "Proud Boy" was present at a rally for community support. Not surprisingly, a Proud Boy may feel comfortable at refinery strike rally because Teamsters Local 120, which represents the Marathon workers is an overwhelming white local union, had endorsed a former cop union leader and Trump supporter for Congress. They also offered to host the National Guard in their union hall. This is not to put a litmus test on whether to support Marathon strikers, but for us to be aware of the local union's politics and history, so as to know what we are getting into, and not be caught off-guard.

Experiencing the class struggle

During my four decades in the International Socialist Organization (ISO), we did a lot of strike solidarity for a pretty small socialist group during an era that most agree was one of the worst periods for the U.S. labor movement. From covering stories of strikes in *Socialist Worker* newspaper,

(available here and here) to hosting “Road Warriors” during the Staley lockout, we took our work and politics seriously. But I think that the most important strike support work we did was for the 1997 UPS strike.

We committed ourselves to campaign at the start of 1997 through the strike in August to a national contract campaign. The Teamsters under reform leadership of Ron Carey launched the Teamsters contract campaign the previous year at the 1996 Teamster convention. The Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) chapters and the Labor Notes network devoted their resources to the upcoming battle at UPS. Lee Sustar, wrote in 2018 about the ISO’s perspective:

The International Socialist Organization (ISO)–which was considerably smaller than it is today–threw itself into that effort…[A]s the 1997 contract approached, ISO members sold Socialist Worker outside UPS hubs in cities across the U.S. The paper featured analysis of the company and its greed, interviews with UPS workers, and exposure of the crimes–literally–of the Teamsters’ old guard officials.

A special supplement on the UPS contract fight included interviews with veteran militants like Vince Meredith, a retired Louisville, Kentucky, driver who had been a central figure in UPSurge. Pete Camarata, a longtime leader of TDU and former ISO member, shared his analysis of Teamster politics in that issue.

Debates about contract demands were reflected in the pages of SW–particularly the issues facing part-timers, who represented 60 percent of Teamsters UPS members, but who were often neglected, even in reform locals. The August 1, 1997 issue of Socialist Worker reported on the huge votes to authorize a strike — 95 percent overall, including 1,000 to 10 in a Minnesota local.

In several cities, the ISO organized many solidarity events that should have been done by the AFL-CIO. Here in Chicago, our solidarity panel had participants that ranged from veterans of the 1930s through Staley to one of the leaders of Teamsters 705. (You can watch the panel here.) The hands down victory of the Teamsters, unfortunately, was later overturned by the government witch hunt of Ron Carey.

Yet, the strike had an enormous impact on the members of the ISO. In a report summarizing the impact of the strike, the ISO steering committee concluded: “The UPS strike allowed ISO members to experience the class struggle.” For me, this is one of the most important aspects of the current strike wave for DSA members, they get to experience the class struggle. The

U.S. has had its heroic moments but the lack of continuity between different generations of the socialist movement is one of its biggest failures. Hopefully, we can build upon what our members are experiencing now for the bigger battles to come.